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ABSTRACT

A guide to the use of and rationale for dialogue journal writing for promoting the writing development of limited English proficient students is organized in question-answer format. It answers questions often asked by teachers about dialogue journal writing: What is a dialogue journal? What are the benefits to students and teachers? How much time is involved in implementing dialogue journal writing? With what kinds of students can it be used? Guidelines for getting started with the technique and a list of further readings are included. The report is a condensed version of a more extensive dialogue journal handbook, and is designed to provide an easily accessible introduction to the approach. (Author/MSE)

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DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT STUDENTS

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ER7

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Center for Language Education and Research
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Center for Language Education and Research

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Dialogue Journal Writing with Limited English Proficient Students

Joy Kreeft Peyton

This report summarizes the use of dialogue journal writing for promoting the writing development of limited English proficient students and the rationale behind the approach. In a question-answer format, it addresses the following questions often asked by teachers about dialogue journal writing: What is a dialogue journal? What are the benefits of dialogue journal writing to students and teachers? How much time is involved in implementing dialogue journal writing? With what kinds of students can dialogue journals be used? It also gives guidelines for getting started with dialogue journals and a list of further reading. This report is a highly condensed version of the more extensive dialogue journal handbook, and is designed to be an easily accessible introduction to the approach.

All teachers would like to have more time to communicate with their students, to learn about their backgrounds, interests, and needs. The need to communicate is intensified with students learning English as a second language (ESL). At a minimum, they bring to school a different language and cultural background. They may also be non-literate in their native language, have had little or no schooling in their own country, and possibly have suffered considerable trauma as they left their country to come to the United States. If they are new arrivals to the United States, they are adjusting to an entirely new way of life as they learn the language and begin to function in school. It is with these students that communication, on a one-to-one basis, is crucial--to aid them in their adjustment and to assist the teacher in understanding them.

Many teachers of such students, both in mainstream and ESL classes, have found "dialogue journals," interactive writing on an individual basis, to be a crucial part of their teaching. Dialogue journals not only open a channel of communication not previously possible, but they also provide a context for language and writing development. Students have the opportunity to use English in a non-threatening atmosphere, in interaction with a proficient English speaker. Because the interaction is written, it allows students to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing that are done in school.

What Is a Dialogue Journal?

A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly--daily, if possible, or at least two or three times a week--over a period of time (semester or school year). Students can write as much as they choose about topics of their choice, and the teacher writes back regularly to each student (each time they write, if possible)--often responding

to the student's topics, but also introducing new topics; making comments and offering observations and opinions; requesting and giving clarification; asking questions and answering student questions. The teacher's role is as a participant with the student in an ongoing, written conversation, rather than as an evaluator who corrects or comments on the writing.

The following examples, excerpted from the dialogue journal entries of two sixth grade students in a mainstream classroom consisting entirely of students learning English as a second language (from El Salvador and the Philippines respectively) illustrate the nature of the writing.

March 17

Claudia: The new teacher or helper in our class is very good. I like her, don't you like her? Today she helped me & us a lot. But Tony didn't want help. Why doesn't Tony want us to help him?

I will try & bring my lunch every day from now on because the turkey stew & other lunches put me sick. I hate them. When I am very hungry I have to eat them but when I get to my house my stomach hurts & I am sick for 3 days. Can't the teachers protest or say something about the food that they give here?

What do you feed chickens here? We have a hen that layd an egg.

Teacher: The lunches are not that bad! I've eaten them sometimes. You are wise to bring your own lunch. That is usually what I do, too. You have such good food at home that nothing served here could taste so good!

Tony is embarrassed. He wants help, but he does not want anyone to know that he needs it. Offer to help him and if he says "no" then leave him alone.

Chickens will eat scraps of bread, wheat, seeds, water and some insects.

March 18

Claudia: but the hen has wat it looks like worms, do you know how to get the hen of her stomach sickness or is it usual for her to be like that because she is laying eggs and she could even lay 30 eggs so I do not know if it is usual or if it is a sickness of her.

oh poor hen she cooks & cooks when I say pretty hen in a low low voice & she looks like she is used to children because she is cook & cooking when I say pretty things, oh she's so nice.

Teacher: I've never heard of a hen having worms--but it is possible. Go to a pet shop or to a veterinarian and ask them. Who gave you the hen? Maybe they will know.

We say that a hen clucks. It is a pleasant little sound as though they are happy. They cackle when they lay an egg! That is usually loud! Does your hen cackle?

I think hens like having people or other hens around, don't you?

* * * * *

April 7

Ben: I got a chance to look at all those weird bones. They're weird because I usually see them with their skin, bones, and hair and with their eyes or eyeballs. Where did you get all of those bones? Did you got them from the desserts? I feel sorry for the turtles or the animals that lived in the deserts and got run over by those cruel men and women...I like and loved tamed animals.

Teacher: Yes, I've collected the bones, and my children, as they've grown up, have found and brought me bones because they know I like to use them in teaching. Have you looked at the teeth? Some come to a sharp point and some are very flat with ridges on the top. All animals die--and if their bones are uneaten the sun and wind and rain clean and dry them out. So many of those animals may have died a natural death.

Students write about topics that are important to them, as they occur in their lives, and explore them in the genre that is appropriate. They are not constrained by teacher- or curriculum-established topics or by a pre-set schedule of topics and genres that must be covered in sequence. Sometimes their concerns and interests are personal (Claudia's complaint about the food at school) and sometimes related to material covered in school (as in Ben's entry). Sometimes activities and interests at home generate the opportunity for learning in the journal (Claudia's discussion of her chickens). Students may write descriptions, explanations, narratives, complaints, or arguments with supporting details, as the topic and communicative purpose dictate. Entries may be as brief as a few sentences, or they may extend for several pages. Topics may be introduced briefly and dropped or discussed and elaborated on by teacher and student together for several days.

Because the teacher is attempting above all to communicate with the student, his or her writing is roughly tuned to the student's language proficiency level. Just as they learn over time to adjust to each student's level of understanding in speech, teachers can easily become competent at varying their language in a dialogue journal to individual students to ensure comprehension (Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed, & Morroy, 1984). For example, in the exchange below from the dialogue journal of a student in the early stages of learning English, the teacher uses relatively simple syntax and words the student knows or has used in her entry. The same teacher's entry to Ben, above, is linguistically much more complex.

Laura: Today I am so happy because yesterday my father sad he was going to by a new washengmashin [washing machine] then yesterday he came with a new car a beg new car is a Honda and she has the radio. Leticia like to talk abowt me yesterday she sad every thing abowt my diat to the boy I danth like that.

Teacher: How nice! A new car! What color is it? Did you take a ride in the new car?

I'm sure Leticia did not think when she told the boys about your diet! She is so thin she does not need to think about a diet so she does not understand how you feel. Tell her!

An essential part of the dialogue journal writing is the fact that there is no overt error correction. The teacher has many opportunities to correct errors on other assignments, but this is one place where students write freely, without focusing on form. (The teacher can, however, take note of error patterns found in the journals and use them as the basis for later lessons in class.) The teacher's response in the journal serves instead as a model of correct English usage in the context of the dialogue. Sometimes the same structures that the student has attempted to use are modeled by the teacher and more details added, as in this example:

Michael: today morning you said this is <u>my lovely friends</u> right? She told me about book story name is "the lady first in the air." She tell me

this lady was first in the air, and she is flying in Pacific ocean, and she lose it everybody find her but they can't find it. They looked in the ocean still not here. Did she know everything of book?

Teacher: My lovely friend Mrs. P reads a lot. She has read the book about Amelia Earhart. It is a good story and it is a true story. They looked and looked but they never found her airplane or her. [Emphasis added.]

This example very clearly demonstrates modeling. Of course, such direct modeling of particular structures and vocabulary does not always occur, nor would this be possible or desirable, for the journals would quickly become stilted and unnatural. More often, modeling takes the form of correct English usage by the teacher, stated roughly at the student's level of ability, and related to something the student has written about, such as in the interchange with Laura, above.

What Are the Benefits to Students and Teachers?

Many teachers, from early elementary grades through adult education, use dialogue journals primarily because they provide an open channel of communication with their students, a means for extending contact time and getting to know them in a way that may not be otherwise possible. In the journals, they can discuss the student's native culture and language, problems in adjusting to the new culture and to school rules and procedures, and personal and academic interests. This information not only builds strong personal ties, but also gives students individualized access to a competent, adult member of the new language and culture. In this relationship there is the opportunity to reflect on new experiences and emerging knowledge and to think together with an adult about choices, problems, and ideas (Staton, 1984b).

There are also benefits related to managing a classroom in which students have varied English ability levels. All students, no matter what their language

proficiency level, can participate in the activity to some extent. In classes made up of students with a range of ability levels or in which new students arrive from other countries later in the year, some may be unable to keep up with the work others are doing and feel lost. But even those students can put something in a journal, receive a response, and thus participate in the activities of the rest of the class. Since students' entries give continual feedback about what they understand in class and their language progress, the teacher receives information that can help him or her to individualize instruction to each student, beginning and advanced.

A major benefit relates to language acquisition and writing development. Dialogue journal interactions have features considered optimal for language acquisition, oral and written (Kreeft, 1984a, 1986; Staton, 1984a): They focus on meaning rather than on form, and on real topics and issues of interest to the learner; the teacher's written language serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the learner's proficiency level; the teacher's entries also provide reading texts that may be even more complex and advanced than the student's assigned texts (Staton, 1986), but they are comprehensible because they relate to what the student has written. Beyond the modeling of language form and structure, the teacher's writing also provides continual exposure to the thought, style, and manner of expression of a proficient English writer. As students continue to write and read the teacher's writing, they develop confidence in their ability to express themselves in writing. Teachers using dialogue journals report that their students' writing becomes more fluent, interesting, and correct over time, and that writing ability developed in dialogue journals transfers to other in-class writing as well (Hayes & Bahruth, 1985; Hayes, Bahruth, & Kessler, 1986).

How Much Time Is Involved?

One possible drawback of dialogue journals mentioned by some teachers is the time it takes to read student entries and write back. It does take time. However, those teachers who have been successful using them report that the time is well spent, for the knowledge they gain about students' interests and problems and the feedback they receive about the activities and lessons of the day serve as the basis for future planning. They have also found ways to adjust the process so it is manageable for them. For example, teachers with many classes and students (especially at the high school level), sometimes choose to keep journals with only one or two classes, or have students write two or three times a week rather than every day.

With What Kinds of Students Can Dialogue Journals Be Used?

There is no limit to the students with whom dialogue journals can be used. They were first successful with sixth grade students, both native and nonnative English speakers (Kreeft et al., 1984; Staton, 1980; Staton, Shuy, Kreeft Peyton, & Reed, 1987). They are now being used with a variety of students who may be considered limited English proficient: ESL students, from elementary grades through university levels (Gutstein, Meloni, Harmatz, Kreeft, & Batterman, 1983); with adults learning ESL who are non- or semiliterate in their native language (Hester, 1986); with migrant children and youth (Davis, 1983; Hayes & Bahruth, 1985; Hayes et al., 1986); with hearing-impaired children (Bailes, Searls, Slobodzian, & Staton, 1986) and adults (Walworth, 1985); and with mentally handicapped teenagers and adults (Farley, 1986); Kreeft Peyton & Steinberg, 1985).

With students who are non-literate, there need be no initial pressure to write, per se. Students can begin by drawing pictures, with the teacher drawing pictures in reply and perhaps writing a few words underneath or labeling the

pictures. The move to letters and words can be made when students are ready. At beginning levels, where students' ability to write is limited, the interaction may be more valuable as a reading event, with more emphasis placed on reading the teacher's entry than on writing one. In classes with an aide or where native language literacy is the focus, it is possible to conduct the dialogue journal interaction in the students' native language. The move to English can occur in line with course objectives or student readiness.

Dialogue journals need not be limited to language arts or ESL classes. In content courses--science, social studies, literature, and even math--they can encourage reflection on and processing of concepts presented in class and in readings (Atwell, 1984), and because they provide a bridge between spoken and written language, they can be a way to promote abilities needed for composition (Kreeft, 1984b; Shuy, 1987).

How Do I Get Started?

- Each student should have a bound, easily portable notebook, used only for this purpose. Paperbound composition books, large enough to allow sufficient writing and small enough that the teacher can easily take all notebooks home after class, are best. Some students may fill several notebooks during a term.

- The writing must be done regularly, but the frequency can be flexible, depending on the number of students in a class, the length of the class, the teacher's schedule, and the needs of the teacher and students.

- Most teachers prefer to give their students time to write during the class session. This time can be scheduled--at the beginning of class as a warm-up, at the end as a wind-down, or before or after a break as a transition time--or left to students' discretion, when they have time. Ten or fifteen minutes seems adequate for students to read the teacher's entry and to write a new one. Teachers usually respond outside class time.

- It may be desirable to set a minimum amount that students must write each time (three sentences, for example), at least in the beginning stages, but the amount of writing beyond that should be up to the individual student. Students should understand that long, polished pieces are not required.

- When introducing the idea of dialogue journals, the teacher should tell students that they will be having a continuing, private conversation in writing, that they can write about whatever they want, and that the teacher will write to them also, but will not correct errors. The mechanics of when they will write, when the journals will be turned in, when they will be returned, etc., should be explained. For students who can't think of anything to write about, the teacher might suggest one or two possible topics. Some students may use them, and some may choose not to. The important thing is that everyone has something to write and that they feel comfortable with it.

- It is important that the teacher feel free to enter into the journal interaction as a good conversationalist and an interesting writer, and expect students to do the same. The goal is to be responsive to student topics and ask questions about them at times, but also to introduce topics and write about onesself and one's own interests and concerns. Teacher entries that simply echo what the student wrote or that ask a lot of questions (typical "teacher talk") can stifle rather than promote interaction.

- Finally, the teacher should relax and enjoy the writing! For many teachers, reading and writing in dialogue journals is the best part of the day, a wonderful time to find out about those people they're spending the semester or year with, to reflect on the day, and to think about where their work together is taking them.

Further Reading

The articles listed in the references give thorough background information about dialogue journals from a variety of perspectives.

Dialogue, a newsletter about dialogue journal research and practice, is available from CLEAR, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118-22nd St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037. Cost is $6.00 for one year, 3 issues. A volume of Back Issues, which contains newsletters from the past 4 years, a history of dialogue journals, a publications list, and abstracts of dissertations written about dialogue journals, is also available from CLEAR, for $7.00. Make checks payable to Handbook Press.

So far, one teacher handbook is available: It's Your Turn Now: A Handbook for Teachers of Deaf Students (Bailes, Searls, Slobodzian, & Staton, 1986). Available from Gallaudet Pre-College Outreach Program, Washington, D.C. 20002.

A handbook for teachers of limited English proficient students will soon be available from CLEAR.

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